

After the Elections:

Prospects for Democratic Consolidation in Iraq

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

On March 5, 2010, Washington Institute experts Michael Knights, J. Scott Carpenter, and Ahmed Ali addressed a special Policy Forum luncheon to discuss Iraq's March 7 elections and their implications for U.S. policy. Dr. Knights is a Lafer fellow and interim director of the [Military and Security Studies Program \(/templateI02.php?SID=2&newActiveSubNav=Military%20and%20Security%20Studies%20Program&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D2&newActiveNav=researchPrograms\)](#) at the Institute. Mr. Carpenter is the Keston Family fellow and director of [Project Fikra \(/templateI02.php?SID=24&newActiveSubNav=Project%20Fikra%3A%20Partnerships%20for%20Democracy%20and%20Reform&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D24&newActiveNav=r](#). Mr. Ali, a native of Iraq, is a Marcia Robbins-Wilf research associate. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Michael Knights

There have been some troubling indicators in the months leading up to the elections. Despite his opponents' best efforts, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has leveraged political benefits from state-funded patronage. In the January 20, 2010, budget, he transferred large numbers of government temporary contractors to full-time positions, mostly in programs funded directly out of his own office. He tried to add a further 115,000 new workers to the public sector in the budget, though the attempt was blocked. He has since announced that 20,000 former military officers will be restored to service. Article 43 of the current budget, which establishes royalty payments to oil- and gas-producing provinces plus other governorates, is a further effort by al-Maliki to "buy votes" at the local level, mortgaging the 2011 budget (when the first payments would be issued) to generate near-term political benefits. In addition, some of al-Maliki's electioneering ploys have verged on open use of largesse, such as the distribution of generators in Baghdad that are emblazoned with his logos but paid for by the Baghdad Amanat, a state organ that administers Baghdad's inner-city districts.

Al-Maliki is not alone in mobilizing state-funded resources to support his campaign. The other main Shiite coalition, the Iraqi National Alliance (INA), has influenced the Accountability and Justice Committee (AJC) to remove more than 500 candidates from the ballot, a move that resembles Iranian use of the Guardian Council to vet candidates before elections. In the absence of a political campaign finance law, there is no restriction or oversight on foreign contributions; elements of the INA, such as the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) and the Sadrist movement, reportedly draw funding from Iran. And in the Kurdish Regional Government, there is only a tenuous separation between state institutions and those of the two main political parties, the Kurdish Democratic Party and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan.

There is no constitutional precedent for the situation that will unfold between the dissolution of the current government on March 7 and the ratification of a new executive branch months later. During that period, political parties could use state organs to buy or coerce support from potential coalition partners. If INA does poorly, its influence on the AJC could be used to delay certification of the final election results, and new de-Baathification measures could be initiated against winning candidates. And if the electoral results are significantly disputed by key parties, al-Maliki would hold key advantages due to his personal ties to senior security force leaders. A key indicator of his intention to pursue that advantage would be the postelection transfer of particularly loyal brigade commanders and their units from their usual areas to potential trouble spots.

J. Scott Carpenter

Turnout this Sunday should be healthy, and it is a positive sign that the Sunni electorate abandoned its boycott. Election day is typically fairly quiet in Iraq, with violence coming both prior to and after the voting. There will undoubtedly be accusations of fraud. The key to mitigating this will be the expected presence of nearly 70,000 party and independent election observers.

Recent changes in Iraq's electoral law will likely impact the results. In 2005, Iraq was treated as a single district under a closed-list system, giving voters little influence over which candidates prevailed. Sunday's elections will occur within each province along an open-list system, meaning political coalition leaders have far less command and control over their constituent parties, who represent the interests of their localities.

One of the most critical changes in the Iraqi constitution going forward is that the president no longer has veto power. This is one less check on the prime minister's power, requiring parliament to take a much more active oversight role.

During postelection government formation, the INA and the State of Law Alliance (SLA) are the most likely to form the core of a governing coalition, but a number of permutations are possible, and any combination would require at least three partners. Of most concern is the prospect of the Iraqi Kurds, a long-coveted partner, overplaying their hand after the election and causing an anti-Kurdish coalition to form. This would be catastrophic for Iraq.

Government formation could take as long as six months, and the Obama administration must set its expectations accordingly. Washington should not interfere directly in the government formation phase but should act as an honest broker behind the scenes. There is the danger that a drawn-out process will create political instability. In that case, a more hands-on effort is called for, which would require the State Department to be more heavily involved than it has been.

Ahmed Ali

The United States and the international community will be watching closely this weekend as Iraqis participate in their second national election, the country's most crucial vote since 2003. The next government can initiate steps that will lead to Iraq having either a strong central orientation or, effectively, three or more federal regions. The results will also answer questions about the role of Iraqi Sunnis. If they emerge from the elections marginalized, a slide back to insurgency and sectarian violence is possible. In addition, Iraqi-U.S. relations after the withdrawal of all American forces by the end of 2011 may be damaged if the next government chooses to ally itself more closely with Iran. The Iraqis have demonstrated that they appreciate the significance of the elections, with more than 6,000 candidates and 300 parties competing.

The decision of the AJC to bar more than 500 candidates from running shook the political system and became, initially, the dominant issue. The decision has created an extremely sectarian atmosphere, but it is important to note that the group most affected by the bans, the Iraqi National Movement (INM), decided not to boycott the elections.

Although the AJC decision created a common theme on which Shiite parties can compete, those same parties have turned to other issues. The two main Shiite coalitions -- Prime Minister al-Maliki's SLA and the pro-Iranian INA -- are engaged in a heated battle over votes in southern and central Iraq. The SLA's strategy is focused on touting al-Maliki's record on security, accusing the INA of being closely aligned with Iran, and warning Iraqis not to let militias and gangs return -- a clear reference to the Sadrist and the ISCI. In contrast, the INA's strategy has been to highlight corruption scandals during al-Maliki's term and criticize his time in office as a wasted opportunity given the increase in Iraq's budget over the past four years. Also, tension is increasing in the northern part of the country, where the major Kurdish parties are expending enormous resources competing with the newly formed Gorran (Change) list.

All parties are also preparing their postelection strategy if they lose. Their main target is the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC), which organizes the elections and has been highly criticized by the parties recently.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Max Mealy. ❖

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